

# Governor's PreK-12 Literacy Commission

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April 23, 2018

Governor Rick Snyder  
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Dear Gentlemen,

In 2015, the Governor's Third Grade Reading Workgroup made several recommendations aimed at improving Literacy in Michigan. One of the recommendations was the creation of a Literacy Commission. In late 2016, Governor Snyder did create the commission (Executive Order No. 2016-18) and appointed individuals representing various state-wide interests to the Commission. The Commission held its first meeting in December of that year.

The Commission's initial meetings revolved around understanding Literacy in Michigan and educating the members on the data around Literacy. Many Commissioners were surprised by Michigan's poor performance especially as it relates to minority children but even more so the declining proficiency across race and economic status where Michigan ranks *last in the nation*.

**But what was initially dismaying became a rallying cry for the Commission members. We became firmly committed to seeing improvement in our Literacy scores.**

As members began to discuss their priorities for the Commission, we soon became daunted by the wide range of tasks set forth in the Governor's Executive Order establishing the Commission and decided to undertake a Strategic Planning Process to set a direction. We were aided greatly in this effort by funding provided by the **Council of Michigan Foundations** which contracted with Public Sector Consultants (Michelle Richard and Patrick Lyons) to complete this work.

Our Strategic Plan has as its top priority increasing statewide awareness of Michigan's poor Literacy performance. Two efforts will begin in late Spring/early Summer toward this priority: the Commission will hold a series of town hall/listening sessions to present local, regional and statewide data and to receive feedback from those regions. Secondly, the Department (through Excellence in Education and the Kellogg Foundation) will be conducting a social media campaign about the importance of literacy and what families can do to improve their child's reading.

Additionally, we believe there to be a lack of systemic coordination around Literacy Improvement in our state. Our educational system is not aligned to properly educate undergraduates, continue to improve the classroom teacher's educational practice around literacy nor to ultimately educate children on reading. There are a few effective efforts around the State working to improve the alignment and we will continue to draw attention to them but we believe this lack of alignment to be a key factor in our current poor performance.

**On behalf of the Governor's PreK-12 Literacy Commission, I enclose the Commission's Strategic Plan for your review.**

If you have any questions and or comments, please do not hesitate to contact me at 616-540-7222 or [amanda.nprice@gmail.com](mailto:amanda.nprice@gmail.com).

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Amanda Price". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the printed name and title.

Amanda Price  
Chair  
Governor's PreK-12 Literacy Commission

# MICHIGAN PreK–12 LITERACY COMMISSION

Two-year Strategic Plan: 2018–20

March 2018



## FELLOW MICHIGANDERS,

On behalf of the PreK–12 Literacy Commission, I am proud to share our inaugural strategic plan. Like you, we are committed to ensuring every child in Michigan has the skills and knowledge necessary to excel. This starts with literacy. While reading and writing have long been a focus of our education system, too many students are falling behind.

However, as a group of committed education, business, and legislative leaders, we believe that can change. The following plan outlines a series of specific tasks we will lead over the next two years to better support parents and educators as they mentor the next generation of readers and writers. To start, we will:

- Launch a public awareness campaign to inform Michiganders about the literacy crisis and how they can help our students and state improve
- Create a public dashboard to allow Michiganders to track the state's literacy progress
- Advocate for bold, systemic improvements

While we believe these efforts will support many learners in our state, we do not believe that dramatic, statewide literacy improvement is possible in the current education system. State leaders, us included, must challenge the “do what has always been done” mentality to envision a brighter future for our children. To that end, the Literacy Commission will partner with leaders statewide to realize a more effective, efficient preK–12 education system for young Michiganders.

We ask you to join us as we serve as champions for children and work passionately and persistently to improve opportunities and outcomes for all. We welcome the opportunity to meet with you and discuss our plans. Please contact me anytime at [amanda.nprice@gmail.com](mailto:amanda.nprice@gmail.com).

Sincerely,



Amanda Price  
Chair, Michigan PreK–12 Literacy Commission

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## MICHIGAN'S LITERACY CRISIS AND OPPORTUNITY

The data are clear: Michigan's students are falling behind on mastering literacy skills. On the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), Michigan fourth graders rank 41<sup>st</sup> in the country—meaning that 71 percent of our students do not achieve proficiency. While most states' reading scores are steadily improving, Michigan is one of only three states experiencing a decline in fourth-grade reading achievement since 2003. If the data are disaggregated by subgroup, results fall even further. For example, black or African American fourth graders have the lowest reading performance in the country. Michigan's literacy crisis touches all student groups, however. White students in Michigan rank 49<sup>th</sup> compared to their peers, and our state's higher-income students (those who do not qualify for means-tested free and reduced lunch programs) rank 48<sup>th</sup>.<sup>1</sup>

Michigan's performance on its own statewide assessment—the Michigan Student Test of Educational Progress, or M-STEP, is no better. Only 44.1 percent of all third graders achieved proficiency on the 2017 third-grade English language arts assessment. When the data are disaggregated by subgroup, performance declines for black or African American students (19.9 percent achieving proficiency) and for students who are economically disadvantaged (29.1 percent achieving proficiency).<sup>2</sup>

By 11<sup>th</sup> grade, proficiency on the Evidence-Based Reading and Writing portion of the SAT is improved, but there are still significant gaps between student subgroups. As a whole, 60.3 percent of Michigan's 11<sup>th</sup> graders score advanced or proficient on this portion of the SAT in 2017. However, only 30.8 percent of black or African American students and 40.9 percent of students who are economically disadvantaged meet that same bar.<sup>3</sup>

The Michigan PreK–12 Literacy Commission (Literacy Commission) is committed to changing that trajectory. Established in 2016 under Gov. Rick Snyder's Executive Order No. 2016-18, the commission was formed to ensure our students are prepared to meet the demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> century workforce. In his order, the governor called for Michigan to be a national leader in literacy, tasking the commission with supporting the state's efforts in achieving that ambitious target.

Since first convening in 2016, the commission has been analyzing state and national data and working to better understand the problem. Our initial assessment shows a state facing many challenges, including a lack of awareness, and acceptance, of the problem. Too often, leaders explain away the data rather than act aggressively to improve learning. At the classroom level, instruction is inconsistent. Some educators are skilled in effective literacy strategies, and others are committed to improving outcomes; however, they may lack the knowledge and tools to effectively support students. At a systems level, our best tools for addressing these skill gaps, teacher preparation and ongoing professional development, are inconsistent. We also know that too many children in our state face the challenges associated with poverty. It is well documented that growing up in low-income households makes it more difficult to be a strong reader, and students often enter schools that are ill equipped to provide the additional support needed to excel.

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<sup>1</sup> 21<sup>st</sup> Century Education Commission. 2016. *The Best Education System for Michigan's Success*. Lansing: 21<sup>st</sup> Century Education Commission. [http://www.michigan.gov/documents/snyder/Final\\_Report\\_-\\_The\\_Best\\_Education\\_System\\_for\\_Michigans\\_Success\\_588111\\_7.pdf](http://www.michigan.gov/documents/snyder/Final_Report_-_The_Best_Education_System_for_Michigans_Success_588111_7.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> MI School Data. 2017. "Grades 3-8 Assessment: Performance Level Snapshot." *MI School Data*. Accessed October 18, 2017. <https://www.mischooldata.org/DistrictSchoolProfiles/AssessmentResults/AssessmentGradesPerformance.aspx>

<sup>3</sup> MI School Data. 2017. "High School Assessments: Proficiency Snapshot." *MI School Data*. Accessed October 18, 2017. <https://www.mischooldata.org/DistrictSchoolProfiles/AssessmentResults/AssessmentHighSchoolProficiency.aspx>



These challenges may seem grim, but they are obstacles that can be overcome. As a commission, we are energized by the students, parents and families, educators, administrators, and state leaders who are making dramatic strides. We have the tools and knowledge to overcome these challenges and build a stronger education system that is poised to help all schools advance literacy and support students in becoming proficient readers.

## BACKGROUND

The Literacy Commission was established as an independent body consisting of members appointed by the governor, state superintendent, Speaker of the House, minority leader of the House of Representatives, Senate majority leader, and Senate minority leader.

Members are required to have deep interest or knowledge of literacy in Michigan and represent diverse perspectives, including the business, education, and philanthropic communities. At least one member must also have experience in supporting urban schools, special education students, and English learners.

The Literacy Commission was initially envisioned by the Third-Grade Reading Workgroup—a group of Michiganders who convened to make recommendations to improve literacy outcomes in the state. As the report explained, “National test results indicate that more than two-thirds of Michigan students fail to demonstrate third grade proficiency on standardized reading tests. Michigan must do better and should strive to be a national leader in early literacy by 2025.”<sup>4</sup>

In August 2017, the commission began a strategic planning process to clarify its work and set priorities for the next 18–24 months. Public Sector Consultants (PSC) was hired to facilitate this process through the generous support of the Council of Michigan Foundations. This plan was approved by the commission in March 2018.

## WHY LITERACY MATTERS

There is nothing more powerful than having the ability to read, write, and communicate effectively. As early as third grade, research suggests that having strong literacy skills is critical to future success. While literacy instruction continues beyond third grade, these foundational skills are key to mastering more sophisticated reading and writing skills taught later. When young readers do not master foundational skills early on, they often have difficulty developing more advanced reading and writing skills—including those needed to excel in other academic content areas. For many students, these challenges continue throughout their school career, which too often leads students to dropping out and not graduating from high school.<sup>5</sup>

The demand for strong literacy skills continues well after high-school graduation. At the individual level, residents with higher levels of education are less likely to be unemployed, and they are more likely to earn more income. As a state, education levels and per capita income are closely linked. Save for a few resource-rich states, states with a more highly educated workforce are more prosperous—making it is vital

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<sup>4</sup> Third-Grade Reading Workgroup. 2015. *Third-Grade Reading Workgroup Report to Governor Rick Snyder*. Accessed October 24, 2017. Lansing, Third-Grade Reading Workgroup. [https://www.michigan.gov/documents/snyder/3rd\\_Grade\\_Reading\\_Workgroup\\_Report\\_490977\\_7.pdf](https://www.michigan.gov/documents/snyder/3rd_Grade_Reading_Workgroup_Report_490977_7.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Annie E. Casey Foundation. 2010. *Early Warning! Why Reading by the End of Third Grade Matters*. Accessed October 24, 2017. Baltimore: Annie E. Casey Foundation. [http://www.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/AECF-Early\\_Warning\\_Full\\_Report-2010.pdf](http://www.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/AECF-Early_Warning_Full_Report-2010.pdf)

for Michigan to prioritize high-quality education for all children.<sup>6</sup> This starts with a robust strategy to improve literacy statewide.

## GOALS FOR MICHIGAN

For our state, communities, and residents to thrive, all Michiganders need to be literate. Literacy is an essential aspect of our everyday lives that is embedded in daily activities, social interactions, and relationships. Literacy not only refers to the ability to read, write, and speak well but also encompasses the ability to comprehend and think critically. To achieve this outcome, Michigan students must stay on track throughout their schooling.

- All children are supported to enter school ready to succeed.
- All students must achieve at least one year of progress in literacy each year.
- All students must graduate from high school with the literacy skills necessary for college and career.

We recognize that achieving 100 percent literacy is an ambitious goal, and we believe that incremental goals are necessary to assess progress from early childhood through college and career. To ensure these measures are meaningful to students, families, and educators, the commission will engage the public to set these goals to mark progress as we work toward these ambitious outcomes.

To assess progress against these metrics, the Literacy Commission will lead an effort to create and deploy a literacy dashboard for Michigan. The dashboard will report on Michigan's progress against its goals. Additionally, the dashboard will inform discussions about how to improve by aggregating performance on a range of leading and lagging indicators. While rigorous school experiences are critical to improving literacy outcomes, we also know that a variety of factors influence a student's academic readiness and performance, including socioeconomic status, school environment, and access to adequate medical services. These factors are not excuses but are rather inputs we must monitor to ensure effective supports are provided for all students to excel. We will partner with stakeholders to identify which indicators can help determine if a student is likely to be on track and why a student may be off track.

Finally, the dashboard will disaggregate data when appropriate. The commission expects to disaggregate performance data by gender, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, subgroup (such as special education or English learner status), and more. We will partner with stakeholders to identify which data points are most useful.

It is critical to note that the commission believes a data dashboard is useful in informing stakeholders across Michigan about statewide progress. We strongly believe that progress reporting at the grade, school, and district levels is essential to achieving our statewide goals.

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<sup>6</sup> 21<sup>st</sup> Century Education Commission. 2016. *The Best Education System for Michigan's Success*. October 24, 2017. Lansing. 21<sup>st</sup> Century Education Commission. [http://www.michigan.gov/documents/snyder/Final\\_Report\\_-\\_The\\_Best\\_Education\\_System\\_for\\_Michigans\\_Success\\_588111\\_7.pdf](http://www.michigan.gov/documents/snyder/Final_Report_-_The_Best_Education_System_for_Michigans_Success_588111_7.pdf)



## PURPOSE

The commission will improve literacy outcomes in Michigan by:

1. Building awareness of literacy performance and current efforts to improve learning
2. Identifying ways to improve literacy practices
3. Advocating for bold systemic improvements
4. Equipping educational stakeholders with sound recommendations to inform their decisions

## VALUES

In working to achieve our goals, the Literacy Commission is unequivocal in the following values:

- We believe all children can and will succeed with appropriate support to meet individual child and family needs.
- We believe Michigan's children and educators are capable of dramatic improvements with the right tools and support—acknowledging that educators need the flexibility to individualize their techniques to meet the needs of every student.
- We are honest about performance and use it as a tool for improvement.
- We celebrate success.
- We work with all partners tasked with the successful development of children.
- We appreciate the diverse and authentic home literacy and culture of each child as he or she develops academic literacy.
- We need to invest in research-supported practices to guide our work to improve student outcomes.
- We need to invest in systems that support effective practices for integrity of implementation, sustainability, and scalability.
- We recognize that systemic change takes time, and we embrace the work necessary to achieve our goals.

## ROLE

The Literacy Commission is a group of 11 individuals tasked with driving statewide improvement. We have a variety of tools available to advance the state's goals. In each of our roles, the commission recognizes that it must leverage its strengths as an independent body composed of diverse voices.

- **Advocate.** The commission will be relentless in its efforts to identify necessary changes and keep literacy a top priority for our state. We will work to equip stakeholders with the information, skills, and resources they need to excel, and we will also hold them accountable for action. Even when it is unpopular, we will demand the changes necessary to improve outcomes for our children. This includes demanding the systemic improvements necessary to improve learning.
- **Lead with partners.** We will lead with partners across Michigan to act on these data and advance best practices. The commission alone is not responsible for implementing new policies and practices, and our role as a partner and convener is critical to moving beyond recommendations to action.

- **Aggregate and amplify.** The commission is well positioned to gather and disseminate the information Michigan needs to inform its literacy work. First, it must lead the charge to curate and disseminate accurate data about Michigan's literacy performance. This includes celebrating progress and being frank when the state must consider a more dramatic course of action. In addition, we will partner with the top researchers in our state and nation to identify best practices for improving literacy skills and make recommendations regarding the implementation of those practices in Michigan. We will share these findings with all stakeholders to inform practices at home, in the classroom, and in state policy.

## PRIORITIES AND ACTIVITIES

### 1. BUILD AWARENESS

Michigan's standardized test scores are concerning. As a commission, the more we analyzed the data, the more our concern grew for children in our state. In our conversations with partners across Michigan, however, it was clear that this sense of urgency was not universal. In some cases, stakeholders dismissed the data. In others, partners simply did not know the extent of Michigan's literacy problem. Together, we must build awareness of our problem among all stakeholders, including families, educators, school leaders, community members, government leaders, policymakers, and more. In addition, we must recognize the tremendous work that *has* occurred to improve outcomes for children and find ways to connect more partners with these resources and tools.

#### Short-term Activities

During the next 18–24 months, the Literacy Commission will:

- Launch a communications strategy to build awareness of the problem, amplify what Michigan is doing to improve, and identify what research suggests is required to improve literacy outcomes. This strategy will likely include:
  - Information about the commission and its work
  - Data about Michigan's performance (disaggregated by subgroup)
  - A social media strategy
  - An interactive website
- Recognize the efforts teachers, schools, and districts have made towards improving preK–12 literacy and connect stakeholders with these tools.
- Develop a data dashboard to report on progress to the public, governor, and legislature.

#### Long-term Opportunities

Following this strategic plan, the Literacy Commission will:

- Build an online resource library, or one-stop shop, for families, educators, and other stakeholders to identify best practices and access existing resources and tools to drive literacy improvement
- Create a professional learning directory and network to aggregate all high-quality tools and resources and make them available to educators across the state

In both cases, we will leverage existing resources, to the extent possible, including tools such as the Institute of Education Sciences' What Works Clearinghouse or practice guides.

## **2. IDENTIFY WAYS TO IMPROVE**

For decades, researchers and educators have partnered to identify evidence-based instructional practices and interventions that work. Too often, however, this research fails to make it into practice. Educators and parents may be unaware of what works, may lack the support to effectively implement best practices, or may need additional time to implement the practices with integrity. The Literacy Commission must lead an effort to centralize our shared knowledge of what works and make it actionable for families, educators, and policymakers.

### **Short-term Activities**

During the next 18–24 months, the Literacy Commission will:

- Review the preparation Michigan teachers and administrators receive regarding literacy and report to the legislature and governor regarding how state policy reflects current research and best practices.
- Explore intentional ways to strengthen connections between early learning and early elementary education, potentially including joint professional development opportunities.
- Review tools currently used to assess early literacy skills (such as kindergarten entry assessments, progress monitoring tools, and standardized assessments) and make recommendations about how to improve access to valid and reliable measures. In addition, recommend data analysis tools and protocols to support school-level teams in understanding and responding to these data.
- Review the systems necessary to develop family supports, educator competency, leadership competency, and organizational infrastructure to ensure effective practices are selected, implemented with integrity, sustained over time, and scaled across the state.
- Advise the governor, legislature, and department on how state policy can better align to the unique literacy challenges that schools face based on the school's locale and socioeconomic status of the school's population.

### **Long-term Opportunities**

Following this strategic plan, the Literacy Commission will:

- Advise the governor, legislature, and department on how state policy can better align to the unique literacy challenges that schools face based on the school's locale and socioeconomic status of the school's population. (Note: The commission views this as an ongoing activity, which is why it is included in the short-term activities and long-term opportunities.)
- Examine current literacy-focused professional development practices across the state and identify and publish best practices related to topics, such as improving instructional practice, supporting struggling learners, and developing literacy leaders. This assessment must include supports for both early childhood and K–12 educators.

- Build and diversify the educator (teacher and administrator; early childhood and K–12) workforce to reflect the demographics of the state’s population.

### 3. ADVOCATE FOR BOLD SYSTEMIC IMPROVEMENT

To achieve these ambitious literacy goals, Michigan must ensure it has systems in place to effectively serve all students in all communities. Too often, there are barriers that prevent educators and stakeholders from implementing best practices, resources, and lessons learned. We must identify ways to eliminate these barriers, unite our collective efforts, and align our implementation strategies to benefit all children across Michigan.

In some cases, these barriers can be addressed within the state’s current educational systems. The Literacy Commission believes, however, that at other times, structural flaws in Michigan’s education systems create inefficiencies and perpetuate ineffectiveness. In those instances, we will advocate for the system changes necessary to advance literacy outcomes.

#### Short-term Activities

During the next 18–24 months, the Literacy Commission will:

- Convene leaders who are committed to improving literacy outcomes to identify, align current efforts and frame bold improvements. We are aware of groups across Michigan having related conversations about literacy improvement, and we need an opportunity to align our work to be as effective and efficient as possible. Where we need systemic improvement, we will identify and advocate for those changes.
- Set common, measurable statewide literacy goals in collaboration with stakeholders—including early childhood partners, K–12 educators and administrators, families, community members, policymakers, and more. The commission has identified draft goals we believe are ambitious and relevant, and we will partner with stakeholders across Michigan to gather input on these goals and update them based on stakeholder feedback. In addition to identifying what we will accomplish and by when, we will also talk to stakeholders about why these goals are necessary to guide our shared work.

#### Long-term Opportunities

Following this strategic plan, the Literacy Commission will:

- Strengthen connections between early childhood education and the K–12 system to ensure literacy instruction and supports build during the early years, especially related to alignment of standards and practices.
- Engage nontraditional partners to support literacy efforts, such as out-of-school programs, business leaders, nonprofit organizations, and philanthropy.

### 4. EQUIP STAKEHOLDERS

While the Literacy Commission does not lead capacity-building efforts or implement new practices or policies, we will advocate for equipping stakeholders with the knowledge, tools, and resources they need

to improve learning. We define stakeholders to broadly include families, educators, administrators, community members, and more.

### **Short-term Activities**

During the next 18–24 months, the Literacy Commission will:

- Identify the knowledge, tools, and resources necessary to implement any recommendation made by the Commission.

### **Long-term Opportunities**

Following this strategic plan, the Literacy Commission will:

- Engage diverse stakeholders to inform implementation of Michigan’s literacy efforts.
- Connect board members, district leaders, building leaders, educators, coaches, early childhood specialists, families, community members, and others with the tools they need to effectively support literacy skills.
- Foster local efforts to identify promising practices for effective literacy instruction and intervention.

## **METRICS FOR SUCCESS**

The Literacy Commission is committed to evaluating the success of our work and of Michigan’s investments in improving literacy. Together, we will share our goals and priorities publicly and report on our progress quarterly. Additionally, throughout our work, we will seek out opportunities to engage third-party researchers to better understand what is working well and what could be improved in Michigan’s statewide literacy strategy. Finally, we believe that an important assessment of our success is improved performance compared to states across the country. For that reason, we will report on Michigan’s performance on the NAEP whenever new data are available.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Thank you to the Council of Michigan Foundations for generously supporting this strategic planning effort and to Public Sector Consultants for facilitating the process.



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**Michigan PreK–12 Literacy Commission**  
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